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ABSTRACT

A survey of Alabama language arts teachers convinced one professor of English teacher education that there are good reasons for incorporating multicultural literature into the classroom, and that it seems especially appropriate for a reader response approach. Since multicultural literature may be as new for the teacher as for the student, teachers and students can explore and respond together. "Enhancing Aesthetic Reading and Response" claims that the efferent approach (reading for information) is emphasized in school, and most teachers would agree. The book's authors feel that an aesthetic response is an equally valid classroom response, and that English teachers must value image and emotion as well as plot analysis and intellect. "M.C. Higgins the Great" (Virginia Hamilton) can be used effectively in class for reader response. On Day 1, after students read the novel, the instructor re-read selected passages aloud and asked students to record their responses; on Day 2 students met in small groups, shared their writing, and selected two common images to use as a book cover; on Day 3 students sketched their covers on the board and discussed why they chose these particular images and what they signified. Each group discussed their cover and identified connections between their images and what they perceived as messages in the text. This exercise shows students that they can begin to analyze and interpret a literary work independent of the teacher or commentaries by a literary critic. (Contains 10 references, drawings of the cover, and explanations of the images.) (NKA)

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Mary Ann Tighe

Multicultural Literature and the Reader's Response:

Developing the Confidence to Become Independent Learners and Lifelong Readers

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NCTE--Nov. 16-19, 1995--San Diego

1.

"Multicultural Literature and the Reader's Response"

I'd like to begin by reading a short passage from a work by an African-American author. As I read, would you think about the sensory images--what you are seeing--hearing--touching--smelling?. What pictures do you see in your mind's eye? What are your sensory impressions? (**Read M.C. Higgins** pp 1-2).

Would you make a few notes on the images that crossed your mind--what you saw, felt, heard, or smelled as I read. Hold--we will look at them later.

There are many good reasons for incorporating multicultural literature into our classrooms.
I surveyed English language arts teachers in Alabama and found that most of them incorporate multicultural literature into their curricula for the following reasons:

1--Our literature should reflect our increasingly diverse population.
2--It helps diverse groups to develop appreciation and tolerance for each other.
3--It raises the self esteem of the various ethnic groups.
4--It encourages engagement with the literature and such engagement encourages thinking skills.
5--Much good literature which is worthy of study has been omitted from our classrooms.

Multicultural literature seems especially appropriate for a reader-response approach in the classroom.

First, much of the current multicultural literature may be new to teachers as well as students. On my survey, most teachers did acknowledge that they felt unprepared to teach it.

Second, there may be little literary criticism available on these authors; there is no authority or expert to tell us the correct interpretation or appropriate evaluation.

Therefore, this is literature which teachers and students can explore and respond to together.

I had been thinking about these two concepts: multicultural literature and reader response theory and how they could be brought together in a meaningful way when I began reading the text Enhancing Aesthetic Reading and Response.
Although the authors do not focus on multicultural literature, what they say is applicable to all literature.

They begin, of course, by citing the work of Louise Rosenblatt and the distinction which she made between two very basic ways of responding to literature:

Efferent--we read for information, for what we can take away with us when we are finished with the book.
Aesthetic--we are concerned with the lived through experience with the text while reading it; where the reader and the text together create the literary experience.

The authors claim that the efferent approach is the only approach which is emphasized in our schools; and most teachers would agree that it is the predominant approach.

They claim that classroom strategies, basal readers, and standardized tests reinforce an efferent response, teaching students to read solely for comprehension and recall of details.

They do, however, cite research which suggests that an aesthetic response is an equally valid classroom response; it is not just emotional, it also involves both perception and cognition and it may be a crucial element in language development.
They argue that schools must provide for an aesthetic response, that English teachers must value image and emotion as well as plot analysis and intellect.

The second half of the book includes a variety of teaching strategies for encouraging such a response.
Some of their ideas are outlined on page 1 of your handout.
But the purpose of such procedures is not to produce a final written product, but to use writing as a way of responding to the literature.
Since I work with preservice teachers, I adapted several strategies to books I have been teaching in children's and young adult literature classes.

I like to use Virginia Hamilton's novels, and one of my favorites is M. C. Higgins, the Great, her Newbery award winning novel.
It is the story of a young boy growing up in the Applachian Mountains, who is influenced by strong family bonds and pride in his family heritage.
The Higgins family lives on Sarah's Mountain, named for M.C.'s great grandmother who escaped from slavery and claimed the mountain as her home.
All her descendants continue to live on this mountain, and they are eventually buried here.
M.C. has a flagpole planted in the center of his yard, and atop the pole is a bicycle where he can sit and survey the mountains and valleys surrounding his home.
But M.C.'s family lives under the constant threat of a landslide.
Strip mining has left a huge pile of debris on the side of the mountain and this "spoil" is slowly sliding downward toward his home.
M.C. is certain they must leave or be buried by the "spoil," but his father refuses to abandon their home and the graves of their ancestors on Sarah's Mountain.
This conflict is resolved when they begin to build a wall strong enough to protect them from the inevitable landslide.
And the foundation of the wall will be the tombstones from their ancestor's graves.

Hamilton's writing is highly descriptive and the imagery and sensory details are a part of the story, not something to be skimmed lightly or passed over completely; readers need to visualize these images.
So I decided to adapt one of the strategies suggested by Anderson and Rubano to initiate our discussion of this novel.
The passages I read earlier were from the beginning of M. C. Higgins, the Great.
What images did you see? (Someone who is not familiar with the book.)

Day 1--After students had read the novel, I re-read selected passages to them and asked them to record their responses; then we discussed what they saw.
Next, they extended their responses, describing the scene as a camera might record it, incorporating details which were not included in the text.
We continued to read about, write about, and discuss scenes throughout the text.

Day 2--Students met in small groups, shared their writing, noted common images, and selected two which they felt would be appropriate to use as a book cover for M. C. Higgins, the Great.
They considered various arrangements, whether to divide the page vertically, horizontally, diagonally, or to superimpose one image on another.
After planning the cover, they wrote a description of the arrangement of the two images on the cover.

Day 3--The next day, I asked them to sketch their covers on the board, and, to discuss the following questions:

(1) Why did you choose these particular images and this arrangement?
(2) What is the significance of the images and their arrangement to the overall text?

As each group explained their cover and discussed their choices, they identified connections between their selected images and what they usually perceived as lessons or messages in the text as well as significant characters and events.

The descriptions of their book covers are printed on pages 1 and 2 of your handout. Each of three groups described both images and their arrangement.

On the OVERHEAD is a sketch of Group 1's cover.

OVERHEAD--GROUP 1/SCENE 1

During the discussion of their book cover, Group 1 explained that both images show M.C. in control.
In the first scene, he is rescuing a young girl from the city, as they swim through an underwater tunnel.
In the second, he is atop his flagpole, watching over his younger brothers and sisters.
They agreed that one of the main messages of the novel was that, like M.C., children can learn to take control of their own lives and assume their independence.

OVER HEAD--GROUP 2/SCENE 2

The second group focused, first, on the mountain and its beauty and, second, on its potential for destruction.
They explained that two of the main conflicts were represented by the mountain itself.
One conflict was based upon the contrasting emotions which M.C. feels for Sarah's Mountain.
Like his father, M. C. has a strong sense of family heritage and yearns to stay on the mountain, but he is being pulled away by his desire to move his family to safety as well as his own eagerness to see the world beyond Sarah's Mountain.
The second conflict is the growing tension between M. C. and his father and is represented by the father's refusal to leave the mountain or to recognize the possibility of a landslide.

OVERHEAD--GROUP 3/SCENE 3

The third group introduced another mountain family, the Kilburns, and another conflict as well as the exciting conclusion to the story. M. C.'s father fears the Kilburns because they are different in culture and appearance.

On the cover M. C. is, once again, on his flagpole looking down on the angry families below.
They discussed the exciting scene near the end of the novel where M. C. forces his father, for the first time, to accept his friend Ben Kilburn

I believe this activity was a valuable experience for these preservice teachers.
In a follow-up to their discussion, we talked about literary terminology which might be applied to several of the "discoveries" they made about their own book covers.
They had talked about "messages" and "lessons;" I suggested that they were also talking about themes and that they had identified one of the most common themes in children's and young adult literature--the search for identity and independence.
In their discussion of conflicts, they had identified the two basic types: internal (M. C.'s own conflicting desires) and external (the struggle between M. C. and his father).
And they had recognized the climax of the story when they described the exciting scene where M. C. finally convinces his father to acknowledge his right to choose his own friends.

They discovered that, starting with the images which they saw as they read the novel, they could begin to analyze and interpret a literary work independent of the teacher or commentaries by a literary critic.
They had participated in a response activity which asked them to move beyond comprehension to analysis and interpretation.
They acknowledged that their own ability to read and respond to literature had been enhanced and that this activity could become a part of their own teaching repertoire.
They could, thus, empower their own students to become more confident readers of literature.

As we prepare undergraduates for careers in English language arts, there is no way we can teach them everything they need to know about all the books they will ever use in the classroom.
And this is particularly true as more contemporary and multicultural works are introduced into the curriculum.
But we can teach them how to read and respond to the many books they will be reading with their classes.
We can demonstrate ways to use that response to initiate discussion which may lead to interpretation and evaluation.
We can teach them to be confident and independent readers who will then model this process in their own classrooms.
We can prepare them to discover new authors from a diversity of cultures and to share them with their students.

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Multicultural Literature and the Reader's Response: Developing the Confidence To Become Independent Learners and Lifetime Readers

"Imagic Umbrellas"

"[T]he production of imagery is a continuous and important part of the reader's construction of meaning" (38).

1. Students read the selected portion of the text and then list all sensory images.
2. Students discuss their images; teacher does not evaluate.
3. Written response:
   Students write a response to the text by filling in the imagery in a scene where it has not been provided by the author.
   Students describe a dream a major character might have, creating a series of sensory images.

"Dependent Authorship"

"[W]ithin all stories are contained the ghosts of other stories. . . . We wonder what absent characters are thinking; we overhear unarticulated conversations; we compose interior monologues and imagine the perceptions of characters; we produce sequels" (55).

1. Students list images they associate with the story.
2. Students share writing possibilities within and around the text.
3. Students create a "missing" portion of the text; they write but not necessarily a piece to be revised and polished.

Anderson, P. M., & Rubano, G. (1991). Enhancing aesthetic reading and response. Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Notes from Group 1

Image #1

There is a dark blue lake, not exactly clear. On one side there are trees, and on the other side are large rocks that separate the lake. Below the water is a small tunnel cut through one of the rocks. It is not very large and M.C. and Lurhetta are struggling to get through. M. C. is grabbing at Lurhetta, and she keeps floating to the top. On the other side of the tunnel is a small, quiet, crystal-clear pool of water. It is surrounded with thick, green grass that feels like carpet to walk on. I see the children waiting anxiously, peeping into the water watching for M.C. and Lurhetta to come up. They are very still and quiet while waiting.

Image #2

M.C.'s face is peering, eyes squinting, hand shading them to see better, as he watches the children swim. On his pole in the yard, he is perched like a hawk intently surveying the area for danger. M. C. towers above the house and yard. His pole sways to give him a better vantage point for his watch. Quietly, he sits, so as to use his sense of hearing to aid in his goal, that of keeping his charges safe. His body is tense and rigid and alert so he can get a jump on anything he sees or hears.

Arrangement

There is a diagonal zigzag down from upper left to bottom right. Left side is water tunnel; done in dark charcoals. M. C. and Lurhetta are struggling. Right side shows M.C.'s pole towering over the yard. M.C. sits on top like a watchman, keeping watch over the children. This side is done in softer watercolors that fade into background, creating a feeling of security.

Notes from Group 2

Image #1

The mountain is a solid hunter green structure. The sea is below. Because it is early morning, the light is dim in the sky, and there is a blanket of transparent fog draped from mid-mountain to below. The fog is very light, enabling the image of the mountain and the river to be seen. The air is cool and crisp giving a feeling of tranquility.

Image #2

The spoil heap is being washed up from under the ground. It is dirty and grey. There is a misty fog that blocks the bottom of the mountain. The spoil is slowly moving down the mountainside.

Arrangement

The cover is a split page which projects tranquility versus possible destruction. The tranquil side is full of colors that suggest all that is good about Sarah's Mountain. The other side is done in black, white, and grey. We see the mountain's beautiful presence being destroyed by the spoil. There is a misty grey fog which allows you to see the mountain only vaguely in the background. The spoil is seeping down the mountainside.

Notes from Group 3

Image #1

M.C. is swaying back and forth on the pole with the green hills behind him and the junkyard underneath him. Gravel is on the ground, and old beat-up cars are scattered throughout the yard. The pole is very high, and it's almost unimaginable how M.C. gets to the top of it. His body hangs over the sides of the top of the pole as it rocks in the breeze. M.C. looks very content and is in deep thought as he sits there. He can look down on everyone and everything below and feel in control of his own life.

Image #2

The Kilburn men have orange hair sticking up all over their heads. They have light skin and freckles to match their hair. Their powerful arms hit the ice blocks with their six fingers wrapped around a big hammer. Jones is peeping around the crack in the door with his eyes wild and big with fear. M.C. is standing on the steps of the porch with an uneasy but even look on his face as one of the Kilburn men walks toward him, hand outstretched to shake. The junk is scattered around in the yard. The pole is shining brightly in the mid-day sun. The distant hills and trees glow with greenness, rudely contrasting with the junk.

Arrangement

The pole would divide the middle of the cover with the Kilburn family and M.C.'s family on either side. Also, around the bottom of the pole there should be junk cars and rocks. The Kilburn family should be a little distorted-looking with their six fingers on each hand displayed. The families face each other frowning.

Resources for Teaching and Responding to

Multicultural Literature

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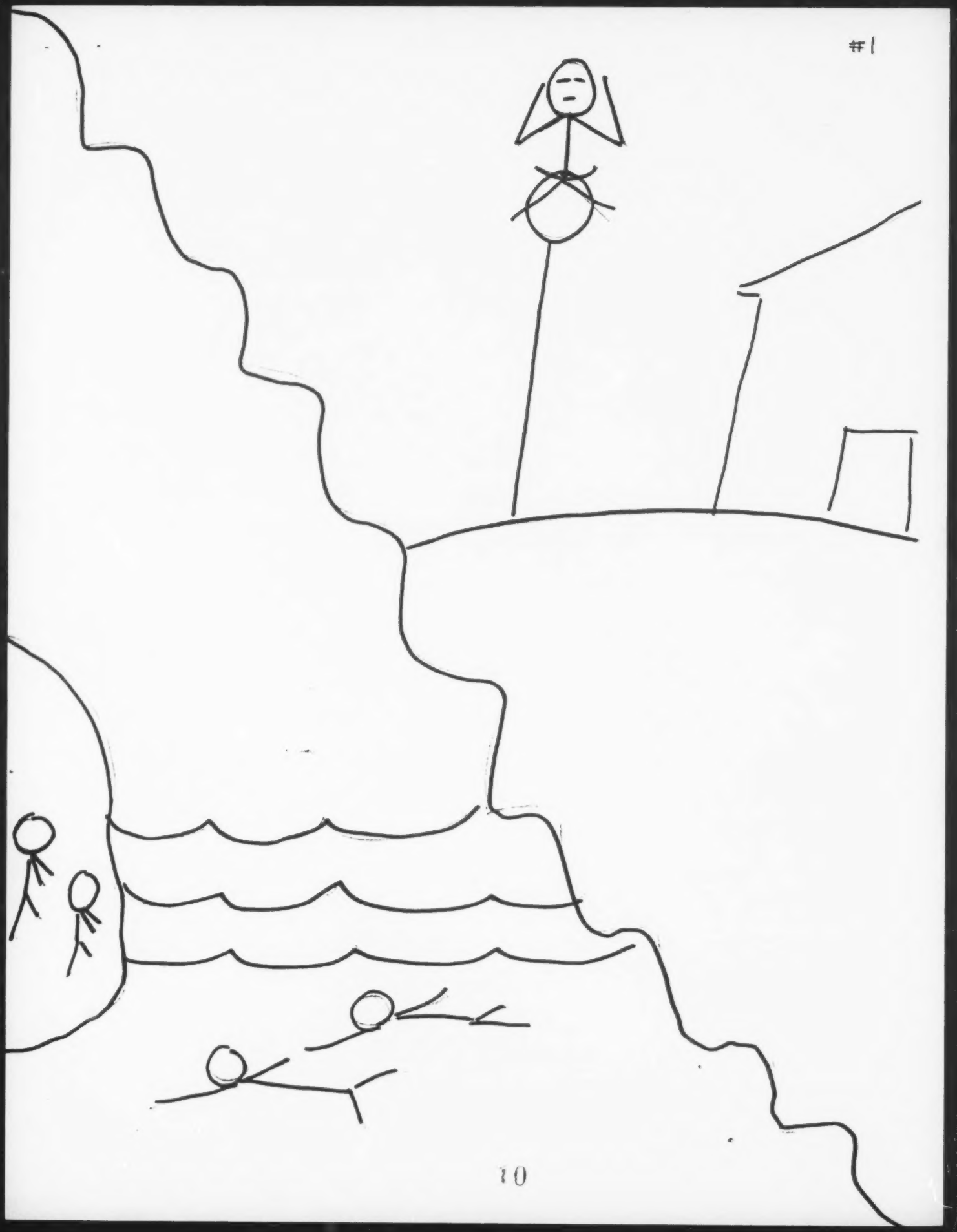
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